

# The Japan Times

## Stalin's reputation not so monstrous 60 years on

By: Doug Bandow – April 30, 2013

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Josef Stalin died 60 years ago. Few people marked the passing of one of history's greatest mass murderers.

Stalin was born in 1878 in Georgia, a province of Imperial Russia. Although he attended Orthodox seminary he did not inherit his mother's religious faith. By his early 20s he was a Bolshevik agitator.

In 1922 he was chosen party General Secretary, originally a position of little power. Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924 triggered a complicated power struggle. Stalin demonstrated political genius and by 1928 was in full control.

The following decade he inaugurated the Great Terror, imprisoning and killing millions. Several leading Bolsheviks were executed after infamous show trials.

The Communist Party which overthrew Russian Emperor Nicholas created an even more godlike Red Czar. Stalin was the Father of Nations, Genius of Humanity, and even the Gardener of Human Happiness!

Ironically, many of those killed by Stalin had helped create the system that killed so efficiently. Murderous revolutionaries were murdered. Loyal communists were punished for disloyalty. Even the most committed communist revolutionaries were not safe from Stalin's revolutionary "justice."

However, there also were millions of victims who did nothing to anyone. The process took on a bizarre life of its own.

Explained social scientist R.J. Rummel: "Murder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the 'enemies of the people' they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering 'plots.' They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) headquarters for information about arrested loved ones."

The purges ebbed in 1938, though brutal repression continued. Then came the German invasion in June 1941, despite the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact signed less than two years before.

However, Stalin won both the war and the peace, turning eastern Europe into Eastern Europe, with pliant regimes in control of most of his neighbors. Eventually the old paranoia appeared to rise again, with claims of a "Doctors Plot" to assassinate Stalin and other officials. Stalin may have been planning another party purge, but time ran out.

He was struck with a cerebral hemorrhage on March 1, 1953, and died four days later. At least, that is the official story. NVDV head Lavrenti Beria may have poisoned the dictator

Stalin's death triggered a lengthy power struggle among his associates, which saw Beria's execution and Nikita Khrushchev's eventual triumph. In a secret speech to party members in February 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin for assorted crimes. However, the Evil Empire, as President Ronald Reagan called it, survived another 33 years.

We will never know with certainty how many Stalin murdered. Official figures suggest about 3 million, but they are neither reliable nor comprehensive. Russian Vadim Erlikman estimated 9.2 million deaths: 5 million in the Gulag, 1.7 million from deportation, 1.5 million from executions, and 1 million from maltreatment of foreign POWs/German civilians.

Another 10 million likely perished from famine and related causes, with Ukraine, once the Russian Empire's breadbasket, the epicenter of death. That would make Stalin's toll almost 20 million, though some analysts believed that the total went higher.

Peer back through a glass darkly and the millions of dead seem to be but a statistic, as Stalin is commonly, though not necessarily accurately, said to have observed. In fact, the reputation of Stalin, a moral monster by any standard, has enjoyed a bit of a revival.

Even Khrushchev began to back away from active de-Stalinization before he was ousted in 1964. While Khrushchev's successors did not revive Stalin's murderous practices, they ended re-examination of that era, forcing Alexander Solzhenitsyn into exile after foreign publication of the latter's masterwork, "The Gulag Archipelago."

Mikhail Gorbachev allowed a new round of criticism of Stalin's rule, which became a flood after the Soviet Union's collapse. However, the chaos of postcommunist life created nostalgia for Stalinist order.

When I last visited Russia in 2006, pensioners were demonstrating in Red Square holding pictures of Stalin. Reason Magazine's Cathy Young noted that a February poll found that half of Russians viewed Stalin's role as entirely or mostly positive, compared to just a third who believed it was entirely or mostly negative.

Less understandable, argued Young, is "the persistent double standard when it comes to communist and Nazi crimes." Communist and even Stalinist apologists "are treated with a respect no one would ever dream of according to ex-Nazis or Hitler whitewashers."

Although it rarely seems appropriate to wish death on others, Stalin was a well-deserved exception. Yet his legacy, however attenuated, lives on.